



How to Quit Smoking

Giving up smoking means conquering two forms of addiction: physical addiction to nicotine, and psychological or behavioral addiction to the act of smoking itself. Both need to be broken. That's why it can be so hard to quit.

Nicotine Addiction

The U.S Public Health Service has described nicotine addiction as "the most widespread example of drug dependence in our country." You may not think of nicotine as a drug like heroin or cocaine, but it is, and it's just as addictive. And like those drugs, you'll experience withdrawal symptoms when you come off nicotine. These symptoms will begin within a few hours of your last cigarette and can last from a few days to several weeks, often peaking after two or three days. While in withdrawal you may feel irritable, depressed and restless. You can have headaches, trouble sleeping, and difficulty concentrating. You may also want to eat more. This period will be hard, but there are ways to mitigate these symptoms with medications and nicotine replacement (see below).

Psychological Addiction

The pleasurable effects of smoking lead the brain to create strong associations between having a cigarette and the activities, locations, or times of day that you regularly smoke. In other words, smoking becomes "paired" with things like driving, drinking in a bar, or watching a sports event. So these activities immediately alert the brain to expect a cigarette, triggering a powerful urge to smoke. Breaking these connections is vital, especially as they can cause you to start smoking again long after the physical addiction has gone. The connections can be so strong that in the early stages of quitting, it's very helpful to avoid these situations altogether to remove one of the causes of your craving.

Preparing to Quit

There are many ways to quit smoking. The most successful make use of both medicines and counseling (or classes). All require commitment, preparation and a healthy dose of will power. Many people have quit simply by setting a date to stop and then stopping (often referred to as "cold turkey"). Many try to cut down first, and then stop. But we recommend that you also consider the many effective medications, therapies and counseling programs that have been proven to help smokers quit.

Cold Turkey

It's the simplest and probably the hardest method, but it has worked for millions of ex-smokers. If you are truly determined to quit and have plenty of will power, this may be a method for you. If you're going to try it, set a date, throw out the cigarettes and follow the "Tips for Quitting" below. If you don't make it the first time, don't despair. Many smokers need a few tries to kick the habit, and these "practice" runs do often help.

Medicines and Therapies

The steps in "Tips for Quitting" are also helpful if you choose to use the medicines and methods described below – and we suggest that you do. In 2000, a panel of physicians and researchers appointed by the surgeon general, looked at over 6,000 studies of quitting and recommended that people use nicotine replacement (or other medications). They also reported that counseling and support groups can really help.

Nicotine Replacement

The panel found that nicotine replacement therapy can double your chances of quitting successfully. These therapies deliver a controlled (and ever decreasing) amount of nicotine to your brain, through your bloodstream, to gradually wean you off the drug. They come in a number of forms: gum and skin patches are available over the counter; for inhalers or nasal sprays you need a prescription. When used correctly, all nicotine replacement products are of roughly equal effectiveness.

Medication

For some people, medications can reduce the urge to smoke and ease the worst withdrawal symptoms. Researchers found that some patients using non-nicotine prescription medication, such as Bupropion (Zyban), could quit smoking more easily. It combats symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, restlessness and depression – making the withdrawal phase more bearable in some cases. Talk to your doctor to see if medication is right for you.

Counseling and Support

Counseling, classes and other forms of social or behavioral support can be very effective. The surgeon general's panel argued that all people who are trying to quit smoking should use these groups. When choosing a group or counseling program, duration of sessions and program length are important. According to Quitnet (an online resource for people trying to quit smoking), sessions should be at least 20 to 30 minutes long; there should be at least four to seven sessions; and the program should last for at least two weeks. The group leader should also be specifically trained in smoking cessation.

In short, expert opinion says that you probably shouldn't try to quit alone or without some form of medication. Consider counseling or classes, and use nicotine replacement or other medications if recommended by your doctor.

Tips for Quitting

When you're ready to quit, draw up a plan for quitting, set a date, and stick to it. Here are some ideas to consider and tips to help you cope with withdrawal:

1. List all your reasons for quitting and keep this list nearby to remind yourself why you're doing it if the going gets tough.
2. Consider cutting down and smoking lower nicotine cigarettes before the quit day.
3. Set the quit day for a time when you're not likely to be stressed or typically smoke a lot (e.g., the holidays, or near to an important deadline).
4. Decide if you want to sign up for a smoking cessation class or use nicotine replacement.
5. When the day comes, throw out your cigarettes. Hide lighters and ashtrays.
6. Avoid as many places and activities as you can that you associate with smoking.
7. Plan lots of activities and distractions in environments that you can't get cigarettes or that don't allow smoking (try the movies, or long walks).
8. Plan to be around people who support what you are doing and avoid people who are likely to give you a cigarette if you ask for one.
9. Carry lots of healthy snacks and things to nibble on (e.g., carrot or celery sticks, or sugar-free gum). Don't worry about putting on a few pounds. It's simply not important compared to quitting smoking.
10. And finally, if you do have a cigarette, you haven't failed. You've just slipped. Don't beat yourself up. Just get back on the wagon.

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